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||1||

I need to sleep. I need to sleep.

I repeated the thought again and again. If I chanted it for long enough, maybe it would come true. I blinked, but I couldn't keep my eyes shut.

Staring through darkness, I could just make out Jake sleeping in the bunk across from me. His chest rose and fell rhythmically, and his arm was flung haphazardly across his face, hiding his scruffy beard. The sound of his breathing and intermittent snoring kept me up. The noise filled the space, ringing in my ears along with the dull roar of the bus's engine.

I pinched my eyes shut, like that might somehow block out the noise, and rested my head against the cold bus window on the far side of my bunk. My mind spun as thoughts tumbled around half-formed. I tried to latch onto them, but they remained out of reach, taunting me.

Stop thinking. Stop thinking.

I took a deep breath, but the humid air and the lingering smell of stale beer and sweat didn't help with my motion sickness. The bus jolted as we bumped over something on the road, and my stomach lurched. My head rattled against the window. I grimaced. The glass vibrated and buzzed like the bus was trying to shake itself apart. The bunk across from me creaked as Jake stirred and rolled over, but he didn't wake up.

Lucky bastard.

I wasn't going to sleep tonight. It wasn't going to happen. I took out my phone and hit the home button. The bright glow of the screen burned my dilated eyes, and I squinted until the display became clear.

2:47 a.m.

I scowled. How was it not even three yet? I'd been lying here for what felt like hours.

I flipped my phone to the camera and put it in selfie mode. There was just enough ambient glow from the emergency lights at the floor of the bus to illuminate my face. I pushed my mess of dyed-black hair out of my eyes, trying to untangle it. I needed to fix my roots, but I knew I would fuck it up for sure. Maybe I could get Veronica to do it for me.

The heavy bags under my eyes looked even darker than usual, but other than that, I didn't look too bad for a guy who hasn't slept in nearly three days.

I put on a slight smile and snapped a photo of myself. I took two more in case the first turned out bad. After sitting up, I opened Instagram and switched from the Make Them Scream shared account to my own. The screen froze for half a minute as it loaded, stretching to get signal. The bus's WiFi crapped out two days ago when *someone* spilled beer on the router, and we hadn't been able to get it working since.

"Come on." I shook the phone and tapped the cracked, smudged screen, like that might somehow help it load. "Stupid piece of shit." Finally, the main screen popped up, and I uploaded the picture of myself.

3am on the tour bus somewhere in Montana and I can't sleep. Too excited for the show tomorrow night. Looking forward to seeing all of your beautiful faces Seattle. xoxo Alex

After cringing at the caption I'd typed and vomiting in my mouth just the tiniest little bit, I added the obligatory hashtags:

#MakeThemScream #Wolfpack #DontBlinkTour2019 #Seattle #IveSoldMySoul #LoveMe #AttentionWhore #Desperate

I quickly backspaced the last four tags and hit the post button.

The loading screen spun for a few seconds, and then it stopped. I

glanced at the upper left corner of the screen.

No service. Fuck.

I rolled my eyes.

Oh well. God bless Verizon's spotty service for preventing me from posting stupid shit to Instagram in the middle of the night.

I slipped my phone into my pocket and got up. The bus turned as it careened down the road, and I gripped the side of the bunk to keep myself from falling over.

Fucking Liz was driving like a crazy person.

I stumbled up the aisle to the front of the bus, bracing myself on the small plastic table that was bolted to the floor as we took another turn.

"Are you trying to kill us, woman?" I asked, plopping down in the passenger seat next to her.

Liz glanced at me, her blue eyes catching mine. They were bloodshot, and her heavy eyeliner and mascara were streaked and smudged like she'd been rubbing them. She always insisted on driving the night shift. Something about enjoying the peace and quiet.

"This road's so fucking narrow." She masked a yawn as she turned her attention back to driving. "I can hardly tell when a curve's coming up."

Tall pine trees towered around us like the walls of a cave. Their branches swayed in a gust, casting eerie shadows on the road ahead of us. We were in the middle of fucking nowhere. There weren't even any streetlights, just the bus's high-beams.

"Whose bright idea was it to book gigs in Chicago and Seattle two days apart, anyway?" I asked.

Liz chuckled and pushed her blond hair out of her face. She had it shaved on one side, which I thought made her look pretty hot.

Although, Liz didn't have to do anything to look hot. She was 5'10", mostly legs, drop dead gorgeous and played the fucking drums. End of story.

"We're lucky Wolfpack even invited us on this tour," Liz said. "We just have to deal with the shitty schedule."

She drummed her black-and-white-painted fingernails on the steering wheel. She never listened to music when she drove. She liked to use the silence to make up her own rhythms. I wondered what was going on up there in that head of hers.

Wind howled as it beat against the bus. The road dipped down over a hill, curving through the thick, dark forest. The wheels screeched as we barreled around it, and I clenched my teeth, gripping the arm rest.

"Can I drive?" I asked.

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"I have insomnia, not narcolepsy, Liz." I smirked, but her attention was still on the road. "I'm not going to just pass out while I'm driving or something."

Liz was quiet for nearly a minute. Her jaw tensed and released as she avoided making eye contact with me. "What happened at the show in Cleveland scared me, Alex," she finally responded.

"It wasn't a big deal."

"You passed out on stage. It was scary."

"The paramedics said it was probably just exhaustion. I'm fine." I noticed I was biting my nails, so I quickly pulled my hand away from my teeth and balled it into a fist at my side.

"They also said you should go to a doctor and get checked out, which you haven't done."

"Maybe I'll do that after the tour. I don't have the time for making an appointment or anything right now. I can't miss a show."

Liz snorted. "You're going to die young, Alexander Pierce. But it's not going to be because you pass out driving our tour bus and crash. That would mean I'd die too, and that ain't gonna happen."

I rolled my eyes and stared out the windshield. The string of Mardi Gras beads hanging from our rear view mirror clanked as they swung back and forth like a metronome. I focused on the winding road ahead of us, where the dark shapes of pine trees zoomed by, creeping in closer and closer the further we went. The lanes were so narrow, I wasn't even sure a car would be able to pass going the other direction.

I leaned back in the seat. My eyelids felt like they were weighted down by anchors. The exhaustion was painful, but my body wouldn't let me fall asleep. I didn't tell Liz, but the reason I didn't want to get checked out wasn't because I didn't have the time. It was because I was scared. What if there actually was something wrong with me? What if they couldn't fix it?

My eyes slipped closed for a second. I immediately snapped them back open, shaking my head to clear my mind. It was better if I didn't know. It was better if I could keep pretending there was nothing wrong. I could live like this.

Shifting in my seat, I searched through the pocket on the passenger side door until I found an energy drink. Liz must have bought it when she stopped for gas . . . but it was mine now! When I cracked it open, the wonderful and sick smell of chemicals filled the air.

Liz glanced at me as I took a sip. "I'm sure that's helping with your insomnia, Alex. That will help you get right to sleep."

"I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight regardless. I might as well not be completely exhausted."

"Have you told Jake and Reggie about it yet?"

"About what, that I have trouble sleeping? No, I haven't told them, Liz."

"You really should." She tightened her grip on the steering wheel for

a second before relaxing it. "I think Jake is worried about you. He asked me if I thought you were on drugs." She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

"I'll think about it," I said as I looked away.

Liz and I were quiet for a minute. I stared out the front window as we drove, slowly drinking the energy drink. Liz yawned, and I passed it to her. She took a long gulp before passing it back.

"Do you ever miss me?" I asked.

"What?" Liz forced a laugh. "I see you every day, Alex. How could I miss you?"

"You know what I mean."

"Alex . . ." Liz turned to face me, and the bus drifted in its lane.

I glanced at her out of the corners of my eyes, waiting for her to finish her sentence.

I blinked.

When my eyes flashed back open, something bright and white burned in front of me—two glowing balls of fire roaring down the road.

What the . . .

It only took me two seconds to realize what was going on, but it was two seconds too long.

"Liz!" I screamed. I dove towards her and grabbed the steering wheel.

"Fuck!" Liz turned her attention ahead, pushing me back into my seat. The set of headlights flew towards us. The pickup truck was right in the middle of the road! What was it doing? It was going to hit us!

In a split second, Liz jerked the wheel, and our bus screeched to the

side.

I gripped my seat. The front wheels went airborne for an instant as we flew into a ditch. My stomach turned with weightlessness, like I was going over a drop on a roller coaster. My vision darkened around the edges.

Liz's arm pressed against my chest to protect me, but when we came crashing to a stop, I flew forward. My head smashed into the dashboard.

Then, everything went dark.

||2||

My ears rang like the sound of cicadas on a hot summer evening—high pitched and distorted. Everything was dark.

Pain pounded through my head. My brain pulsed against my skull in time with the blood rushing through my temples. My eyes fluttered open. The headache was so nauseating that my vision blurred like I was underwater. Foggy shapes moved around me like phantoms.

Where am I?

I could feel scratchy fabric against my back. I forced my eyes open again, and a blur of colors waved into focus. A string of purple and green Mardi Gras beads hung from a rear view mirror, swinging back and forth lazily.

I was still on the bus.

An icy gasp of wind howled into the vehicle, and a hand gripped my shoulder as a face came into view. His mouth moved, but the ringing in my ears was too loud. I couldn't make out anything he was saying.

Blinking a few more times, my vision finally cleared enough to recognize the face.

Jake.

His scruffy beard and messy mop of hair were unmistakable.

"Are you all right?" his voice came through, but it was muted and distant. "Alex, are you all right?"

I tried to answer, but pain surged through my head like a tidal wave. My mouth swelled with hot saliva.

Oh fuck . . .

In a rush of panic, I shoved Jake out of my way, pulled myself up and stumbled out of the bus. My legs gave out beneath me, and I gripped the side of the door to keep myself from falling over. I gagged, and then energy drink mixed with acid powered up my throat, bursting out of my mouth like a water balloon exploding.

"Oh my God," I groaned, grasping my head. I braced myself by the knees as I dry-heaved twice. After gagging once more, I was sick again.

My body shivered and shook as I clutched my ribs. My tongue and the roof of my mouth burned as I spat onto the ground, trying to get the bitter taste out of my mouth. Drool clung to my chin. I wiped it off on the back of my hand. Another blast of wind barreled past me, numbing the surface of my skin.

"Jesus Christ," Jake muttered next to me. "Fuck."

I panted, leaning against the bus as I tried to regain my composure. The pain in my head throbbed behind my eyes, but the vomiting had helped to dull its intensity. "I think I'm okay," I managed to say between shivered breaths.

"Alex, sit down." Jake pulled my arm, and my body immediately responded. I collapsed onto the ground, my back against the cold metal of the bus. I leaned my head back, gasping for breath.

"What's your name?" Jake asked me. I tried to focus on him, but I couldn't make out any features of his face other than his eyes—deep brown and staring at me. They glowed and flickered with a faint trace of light.

"Alex," I finally responded. I paused for a second and pushed my hair out of my face. "I mean, I can't remember who I am, but you keep calling me Alex, so I assume that's my name."

Jakes's thick eyebrows curled in confusion and concern, and I couldn't stop a grin from sneaking across my face.

"You asshole." Jake punched me in the shoulder lightly. "You're such a fucking shit."

"Alexander Pierce," I said.

"How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-two. Going to be twenty-three on the thirty first." Cold air bit at my skin. I dug my fingers into the dry dirt at my sides. My head spun. I wasn't ready to get up.

"Where are you?" Jake continued questioning me.

"I don't know . . ." My mind froze, and I looked up at the sky. Clouds streamed over it like advertisements tugged behind planes at the beach. The moon peaked out for a second before flickering behind darkness. "Somewhere in Montana," I finally responded.

Jake nodded. "What's the date?"

"It's Saturday . . . October twenty sixth." My teeth chattered, and pain pulsed through my skull. "How long have I been out?"

"Only about ten minutes," Jake replied. A gust of wind blew his dark hair into his face, and he quickly pushed it back. "You're bleeding a bit, man." He wiped at the side of his head.

I reached to my hairline and felt something sticky and warm. When I brought my hand back, dark red streaked my fingers. I swallowed down another wave of nausea. My teeth chattered in my skull. "Is Liz okay?" I managed to ask. I could feel my body quivering.

"Liz is fine," Jake said. "She's checking on Reggie and Veronica."

I clenched my teeth. Why hadn't Liz stayed with me? Didn't she care if I was okay?

I pushed the thought away. "Are they okay?" I asked instead. I shook from the cold. It couldn't have been more than thirty degrees out. If I'd've known I was going to have to go outside, I would have at least put a shirt on.

"I think so." Jake pulled his black sweatshirt off and placed it over me. "Stay here."

He darted off, and I leaned my head back against the bus. I knew I needed to get up, but my entire body felt weak, and I couldn't stop my hands from trembling. The world spun around me and undulated like I was drifting through swells in the ocean.

"Are you guys okay?" Jake's voice echoed in the distance. He couldn't have been more than twenty feet away, but with the wind carrying it he sounded much further.

"We're all right," Reggie replied. "A couple bangs and bruises, but we'll be fine. Is Alex okay?"

"I don't know, man," Jake said. "He doesn't look so good. He was answering questions and talking all right, but I think he hit his head pretty fucking hard. He puked a couple of times."

"Oh, fuck," Reggie replied.

Their voices drifted off as I closed my eyes.

| | |

"Hey, Alex!"

"What?" My eyes shot open. Jake was leaning over me.

"You can't fall asleep, okay, man? You might have a concussion."

"Sorry," I said.

"Put this on." Jake handed me my denim jacket. I'd had it for about five years, but I still wore it almost every day. He must have found it with my stuff on the bus. I gave him back his sweatshirt and pulled my jacket on. He offered me his hand and helped me to my feet.

"I'm going to help the others." Jake made it three steps before turning back to face me. "Seeing if there's a way to push the bus out of this ditch."

I nodded to him, and then he spun on his heel and jogged off. I put my hands in my pockets and leaned back, grimacing. My head

pounded. All I wanted to do was lay down and fall asleep. I looked up toward the road, but other than the bus's headlights and the light coming out of the windows, the night was completely dark. I couldn't even tell how far we'd gone into the ditch.

What happened to the pickup truck? My memory of the crash was hazy, but I didn't think we hit it. Liz swerved, and then we went into the ditch, but where had the truck gone? Even if we hadn't hit it, surely it would have pulled over. It didn't make sense, unless . . .

Voices echoed from the other side of the bus, interrupting the thought I didn't want to finish.

I stumbled over to meet the others, examining the side of the bus for damage as I went. Remarkably, there were no dents or scratches, just the horrible paint job that marred the bus's side like a gaping wound. Veronica had declared one night, after too much tequila, that our bus needed a name, and it needed to be purple, because that was her favorite color. The next day, as a joke, Jake and I had spray painted the words "The Scream Machine" across the side of the vehicle in bright purple and silver. At the time, I thought it was hilarious and beautiful, and we ended up leaving it, but now, looking at the violet monstrosity just made me nauseous.

"Veronica, can you get in and put it in reverse while we try to push it out?" Reggie asked as I rounded the front of the bus.

"Why me?" Veronica put her hands in the pockets of her thick, purple sweatshirt.

"Cause you're the smallest, babe." Reggie leaned in and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Okay, fine. I'll do it." The wind tugged at the strands of her lavender hair that had escaped from her hood as she pulled the driver's side door open and climbed in.

"If it starts to slip towards us, hit the brakes," Reggie called to her.

"Can I help?" I asked.

Liz nearly jumped where she stood, and Jake and Reggie turned to

face me.

"Are you sure you're all right, man?" Reggie asked. "You took a pretty hard hit to the head."

"It's just a bit of a headache." I shifted on my feet. I tried to catch Liz's eyes, but she was looking at the ground. "Once I get moving and doing something I think I'll be okay."

"All right." Jake nodded. He lunged against the front of the bus, and Reggie and Liz leaned in next to him.

"We're going to start pushing, Veronica!" Reggie called.

I leaned in next to Liz. "Are you okay?" I asked lowly.

"I'm fine," she replied, focusing on her hands as she gripped the bumper of the bus.

"Ready?" Jake called. "One, two, three!"

The tires squealed as they spun to life, spitting leaves and dirt into the air. My feet slipped in the loosely packed dirt as I pushed as hard as I could.

It didn't budge.

"It's not working!" Veronica called to us as the wheels stopped spinning.

No shit.

"Let's try it again," Jake said. "One, two, three."

I leaned with all of my weight, digging my feet in behind me.

Nothing.

"It's no good," Reggie said when we stopped pushing. "We're ten feet off the road. We aren't getting it out."

Veronica leapt down from the bus, her Converse kicking up dust as she landed. Tiny twigs snapped beneath her feet. "Does anyone have

any cell service?" she asked. "Maybe we could call someone."

I pulled out my phone and checked it, even though I already knew there wasn't any service. The screen lit up, and I was greeted by zero notifications and the friendly "no service" reminder.

"Nope," Jake sighed.

"I've got nothing," Liz said.

Reggie shook his head.

Veronica looked at me, her hazel eyes pleading for me to give her good news, but I shook my head as well.

"What are we gonna do?" Veronica was trying to hold herself together, but her voice faltered. "How are we gonna get out of here?" She clenched her hands into tiny fists by her sides.

"It'll be fine, babe," Reggie said. He went over to her and rubbed her back lightly.

"How will it be fine?" she whined, shoving Reggie's hand off her. "We're stranded on some back road in the middle of nowhere in Mon-fucking-tana!" She sucked in a few gasps of air, like she was trying to snuff out a candle that someone had lit inside her lungs. Her eyes shot over to me. "If Alex hadn't broke the WiFi, we wouldn't be stuck like this."

"It was an accident," I grumbled. I'd already apologized enough for what had happened.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have been using the router as a fucking coaster."

"Veronica, that's enough," Jake said. "It's not his fault, and we aren't stranded. Someone will drive by eventually. We've just gotta flag down the next car that passes. I'm sure it won't be long. You and Reggie go get warm on the bus and see if you can get some sleep. I'll watch the road."

Reggie nodded and led Veronica back onto the Scream Machine.

Jake's phone flashed as he turned on the flashlight app. He accidentally shone it in my face, so I covered my eyes.

"Sorry." He pointed the light at the ground, then looked to Liz. "Don't let him fall asleep." Without waiting for an answer from either of us, he turned and hiked up the ditch toward the road.

Liz leaned against the bus and took a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of her leather jacket. She pulled one out and put it between her teeth. Her hands shook as she attempted to light it. Every time she got the lighter to flicker on, it immediately snuffed out.

"Here." I took the lighter from her and held down the ignition. She breathed in, and the tip of the cigarette glowed red.

"Thanks," she said. Smoke plumed out of her mouth as she stared off into the woods, avoiding eye contact with me. I breathed in heavily through my nose. I loved the smell of cigarette smoke.

"Do you want one?" Liz held out the pack to me, still avoiding eye contact.

"No, I'm okay," I said. I'd been trying to cut down on the amount that I smoked, sticking pretty much to just weed. Cade, the vocalist for Wolfpack, had been practicing screaming with me, so my throat was pretty rough from that, on top of the strain of performing. I pulled my jacket tight around myself, shivering.

I need to put on something warmer.

"I'm sorry," Liz finally said.

"It's not your fault."

"I should have been paying better attention. I should have seen that truck coming sooner."

"That asshole was driving like a fucking maniac," I said. "He was right in the middle of the road, and he didn't even pull over. There's nothing you could have done."

"I should have told you to wear a seatbelt."

"I'm okay," I said. "Just a bit of a headache."

"I still feel bad. You were unconscious, and . . . "

"Look, Liz. It's not your fault. No one is blaming you. The bus can still run. It's just stuck. As soon as someone comes by, we'll be able to get out of here. We probably won't even be late for the show."

Liz nodded. Her blue eyes shimmered in the light. Was she . . . crying? Liz never cried.

"Alex, I just thought of something."

"What?"

"I don't remember when the last time I saw a car before that truck was. I don't remember seeing any. Not even one."

I froze as her words sank in. She'd been driving since midnight. How could she not have seen a single car? It was the middle of the night, sure, but not even one?

How long was it going to be before someone drove by?

I stared off into the woods in front of us. The headlights illuminated tree after tree until everything faded to darkness in the distance. Branches shifted and moaned with the wind like arms with thousands of tiny, pointy fingers.

Something flickered and glimmered behind one of the distant trees. My heart pounded as I focused in on it, my eyes stretching wide. I wasn't sure if it was a pair of eyes or just a leaf. Sticks snapped in the distance, the sound echoing through the forest like a rock thrown into a well. A dark shape moved between the trees.

My eyes watered and burned from staring. I blinked.

It was gone. Just my eyes playing tricks on me. A weird reflection from the headlights. Or maybe it was some sort of animal.

Wolves. Bears.

A chill traveled down my spine. The unsettling sensation that we were being watched latched on to the back of my mind.

"Maybe we should turn the headlights off and get on the bus," I suggested. "We don't want to run the battery out."

||3||

"Stop biting your nails."

I snapped my hand away from my mouth, curling my fingers into my palm. How did Liz know I was doing it? She wasn't even looking at me.

"Sorry," I said.

She tilted her head to the side, cracking her neck loudly. We sat on the bench behind the small, plastic dining table. Her leg was so close to mine, I could almost feel the contact. My entire body was on edge—all of my muscles tensed.

"I don't know if it's a good idea for Jake to be out there by himself," I said.

"He's a grown ass man, Alex." She turned to me. "He can take care of himself."

"I know." I glanced around the bus uneasily, gripping the worn vinyl of the seat. Everything was still the same as before, just tilted about ten degrees from normal. It was like I was in a pretend world—one that looked identical to the one I knew, except the force of gravity had been tugged a hair out of whack. The sense that something wasn't right—that something was watching us—clung to the back of my mind. I couldn't shake it.

"What are you worried is going to happen to him out there?" Liz leaned forward, running her hands down her designer ripped jeans. Her fingers almost brushed against my leg, but she shifted to avoid the contact. Instead, she rested one elbow on the table, holding her chin in her hand.

"I don't know. He could get attacked by bears, maybe. Wolves."

"Wolves?" Liz forced a laugh, and then she actually laughed.

"Really, Alex?" She shoved my shoulder playfully. "You've been hanging out with Wolfpack too much." She paused for a second as she chuckled. "I swear, their drummer, Beck, actually thinks he's a werewolf. Every time we drink with them, he goes on and on to me about it."

I smirked at her. "He's just telling you that to make himself seem interesting because he wants to get in your pants."

Liz rolled her eyes.

"You know I'm right. Can't blame the guy, though. You're hot as hell, Liz."

Her face blushed pink, and she tried to hide the fact that she was smiling. She tugged her lips down over her teeth.

"Have you gotten with him yet?" I asked.

"No," she responded immediately. "I mean . . . what? This is a really awkward conversation, Alex."

"It's okay, I know. Take your time getting over me, Liz." I pretended to yawn. "I've been told I can be a tough act to follow. Beck should already know that, though, considering we open every show for them." I grinned at her.

"Oh my God." Liz put her hand to her forehead and covered her face. Her body shook as she held in a laugh. "That is one of the worst jokes you've ever told, Alex."

"But it still made you laugh."

Liz turned to me, her lips pressed together in a soft smile. "I'm going to make something to eat. Do you want anything?"

"I'm all right," I said. My head was still aching, killing any appetite I might have had.

Liz nodded and pushed herself to her feet.

I leaned back, my eyes getting heavy. As my energy dipped, a chill

ran over me. I stood, trying to get my blood going again.

How long had Jake been outside? I turned around and peeled back the blinds, but the night was black as ink. I squinted out the window toward the road, but it was pointless. The dim light from the interior of the bus glared off the glass, and I couldn't see a thing.

The sound of a thousand tiny stones tumbling echoed through the bus.

I glanced over my shoulder. Liz was pouring a bowl of cereal.

Cold sweat slicked the back of my neck, and I shivered. I needed to put on warmer clothes. Taking off my denim jacket, I headed toward the aft end of the bus to get changed. I kneeled in front of my bunk and pulled out my duffel bag. After sifting through it, I finally found a clean T-shirt I'd gotten at a Taking Back Sunday concert. I threw it on and then pulled a black hoodie over my head.

As I stood, my head spun, and my vision went dark for a second. I clutched my temple and braced myself against the bunk.

I need to sleep. I need to sleep.

My eyelids blinked shut for second. Outside a gust of wind howled through the woods like a wolf whining in the distance. My eyes watered as I opened them. I couldn't keep them shut. I thought about Jake alone by the road in the dark, and a lump sat in my throat like a pill I couldn't swallow.

I should go outside and check on him.

I willed my legs to move, imagining the motion of walking. Down the aisle, through the door, and up the ditch. But my feet wouldn't budge. Instead, I stared at the bunk in front of me—motionless—thinking about sleep.

I need to sleep.

Whispers drifted from behind the divider—from the section of the bus where Reggie and Veronica slept.

"It's going to be okay," Reggie whispered, but he sounded distant. Muted. "We'll get out of here soon."

Veronica whimpered softly in response, but I heard no words. If she said anything at all, it was too hushed for me to hear it.

"Please, try to get some sleep," Reggie begged. His voice echoed through the night, like it was coming from outside the bus.

"Sleep . . ."

What the hell . . .

"Alex?" A hand gripped me by the shoulder.

I snapped my head around.

Liz was standing behind me. She frowned, her pierced eyebrows turned down in concern. "You okay?"

I pinched my eyes shut once before reopening them, clearing my vision. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Your hands are shaking." She reached out as if to calm me, but she froze before touching my hands.

My fingers curled into my palms as I fought off the shakes. I focused on my breathing.

Trees groaned and creaked outside, but the bus was silent. I listened for the voices on the other side of the divider again, but Reggie and Veronica had gone quiet. Nothing.

"Maybe you should try eating something," Liz suggested, pulling my attention back to her. "When was the last time you ate?"

I shook my head. "I'm all right. Just a bit tired, you know?"

She frowned. "You want to lie down? I can turn out the lights, and you can try to get some sleep if you want. I promise I won't tell Jake." She smiled faintly. "Besides, I've heard it's just a myth that you aren't supposed to sleep if you have a concussion."

I ran my hand back through my hair as my headache pounded behind my temples. All I wanted to do was close my eyes, but I knew it would be useless.

"I don't think I'd be able to sleep regardless," I replied. "I'll just stay up."

"Okay." She nodded and headed back towards the front of the bus, but she stopped when she reached the doorway. "You're still having nightmares, aren't you?"

I froze when she said it. I'd told her about my nightmares when we were together, but I'd always acted like they weren't significant. I hadn't wanted to burden her with something like that—something that wasn't even real. It surprised me that she remembered.

"I heard you screaming in your sleep again a few nights ago." She leaned against the doorway, looking at the floor as she spoke to avoid eye contact.

My breath caught in my throat as a chill rushed through me. I didn't know I screamed in my sleep. I didn't even remember the details of the nightmares. Or, at least not all of them. All I knew was waking up paralyzed with dread and terror—an enormous weight pressing down on my chest as the world slipped apart around me.

"How long have I screamed in my sleep?" My voice came out quieter than I'd intended.

"It's not every night, but you always have." She drummed her fingers lightly on the wall. "At least since I can remember."

I paused for a second. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She finally turned to face me. "Alex, I thought . . ." Her brow furrowed. "Wait, you didn't know?"

"No." I shook my head.

"I would have told you if I'd known." She bit her lower lip. "I didn't want to bring it up if it was something you were embarrassed about."

I frowned, trying to think. A part of me was desperate to know what the nightmares might mean. The memories always rushed away the moment I woke up.

"Have I . . ." I trailed off, unsure how to ask. "Do I ever scream words?"

Liz let out an audible sigh, and her gaze turned to her feet before she looked back to me. "I tried to wake you up once while you were screaming. You opened your eyes and yelled at me to get the fuck out of your head."

"Liz." I reached out to her, but she was too far away. I felt like I was falling. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"It's fine." She shrugged and blinked a few times. "You were dreaming. It just scared me when it happened. It was like it wasn't you—"

A sudden gust of wind rushed through the trees outside like a wave crashing over a beach, cutting off her sentence. The moan of limbs cracking echoed through the woods. Liz flinched and glanced behind herself before turning back to me.

"It's loud outside," she said, which was a weird way to phrase it, but I had been thinking the exact same thing.

I nodded and glanced toward the window. I imagined Jake sitting alone in the cold and the dark, staring down the road and waiting for a car to come by. I remembered the pickup truck we'd almost hit. Its headlights glared like the eyes of a devil as it drove toward us, right down the center of the road.

Who does something like that . . . runs another vehicle off into a ditch and then doesn't even stop? It was like it was on a mission. Like it *wanted* this to happen.

I shuddered as I thought about it, and then the sound of wolves howling screamed through the night like a distant siren. This time, I was sure I wasn't just imagining things.

"I'm going to go check on Jake," I said. Before Liz could stop me, I

headed for the door.

||4||

Stepping out of the bus was like plunging into an ice bath. Branches groaned and shifted as the wind rustled through the trees. I listened to see if I could hear Jake, but there were no signs of him.

He's gone.

My heart slammed against my ribs. I was too late. The wolves had already gotten him. Bears had clawed him to pieces and dragged him back to their den for dinner. The dark, inky night had consumed him, never to be seen again.

I shook my head. I was being ridiculous. After pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I lit up the screen. It was 4:28 in the morning. My hands shook from the cold and sleep deprivation as I flipped it into flashlight mode.

The flash lit up my feet where tangles of dried weeds and sage brush covered the ground. Dead pine needles crunched under my Vans as I climbed up the ditch.

"Jake?" I called when I reached the road.

I turned to my left, shining my light down the desolate tunnel of trees. The beam cast shadows along the gritty road. Phantoms formed within potholes and behind rocks. Their shapes crept across the paved gravel like rats as the light passed over them.

A chill surged through me, and my heart jumped into my throat. Jake wasn't there.

I turned to the right.

A sharp, bright light blasted my eyes like a laser, momentarily blinding me. I snapped my eyelids shut, and the world glowed red. I brought my hand up to cover my face before daring to open them again.

"Alex?" a voice asked.

Jake.

I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. The warm air from my lungs condensed in front of me like tiny ice crystals frozen in time.

"Hey," I said as I shuffled over to where his light was coming from. Twigs cracked under my feet as I passed through the thin atmosphere. The world was a vacuum, sucking all the heat from my body. I put my phone back in my pocket and crossed my arms in front of me for warmth.

"How are you feeling, man?" he asked as I got closer. His voice shook as he spoke, and he crouched by the side of the road with one hand in his pocket, the other holding his phone. Jake was a big guy. He was tough. He would never admit to being cold or anything, but I could tell he was freezing his ass off sitting out here.

"My head still hurts a bit, but I'm fine." I sat down next to him on the side of the road. "Think it's just a bruise."

Jake nodded. "That's good."

Even though we had both turned off our phone lights, my eyes were adjusting, and I could make out his face in the glinting light from the moon and stars as the clouds drifted past them.

He reached up to his ear and spun the Sharpie he always kept in his gauge a few times before taking it out. He played with the cap, clicking it open and closed. Jake told people he kept it in there so he'd be ready if anyone ever asked for his autograph, but I knew it was really because he liked to draw. He never wanted to miss a moment of inspiration. He'd designed almost all of his own tattoos and even some of mine—the banshee I had on my left arm and the siren I had on my right.

"I was worried about you, Alex," Jake finally said, putting the Sharpie back into the hole in his earlobe.

I avoided eye contact and stared off into the forest, clenching my

hands into fists. My injury was all anyone seemed focused on. I was fine.

I could convince myself I was fine.

"Any luck watching the road?" I asked.

Jake snorted a laugh and held out his arm as though to gesture *this is it*. "Nope, nothing yet. Haven't even seen a single car."

I nodded, and we were silent for a minute.

"I thought I heard wolves," I finally said.

"I've been hearing them, too." Jake nodded. "These woods are alive." He turned to look at me. His hood was up, and his face was drawn into a frown. A cloud passed over the moon, and the entire night dimmed like a candle being snuffed out.

"What if no one comes by?" I asked.

Jake furrowed his brow. "What?"

"I don't mean like, ever." I paused for a second. That wasn't what I meant, was it? Of course not, that was crazy. "But not for a while," I continued. "Liz said that the truck that ran us off the road was the first car she'd seen in hours. What if no one comes by for a long time?"

Jake exhaled heavily, his breath turning to mist in front of him.

"What if we miss the show?" I continued.

"Alex, let's just worry about getting out of here first. We'll figure out the situation with the gig after that."

I clenched my teeth but nodded. I didn't want to miss the gig—be that band that didn't show up. As a kid, seeing the bands I loved performed had meant everything to me. Listening to them and being a part of it made me feel okay—like I wasn't alone—even when things were falling apart.

I didn't want to let anyone down, especially not when we were just starting to get a good base with our own set of fans. We had all put so much work into this.

I couldn't let them down. If I let them down . . . what if they didn't love me anymore?

The idea sounded extremely conceited, but it was the truth. As we'd started to gain fans, I'd become addicted to the idea of being loved and adored by people I didn't know. The thought of letting them down frightened me. Fame was slippery, and if I released the teeth I'd clenched around it for even a second, it would slither away. All of our work would be for nothing. Gone in an instant.

Logically, I knew this wouldn't happen from missing one show. It was just one show, and being stranded in a ditch after an accident was as good an excuse as any. But, excuse or not, I would still be letting everyone down. I couldn't do that. I couldn't fail.

I tried to stop my mind from winding off on a tangent, but there was something compulsive and sick about the way I thought about things when confronted with the possibility of failure. I knew my thought patterns were irrational and aberrant, but that didn't mean I could stop them, and it didn't make the fear and anxiety any less real. End-of-the-world syndrome was what my mom had referred to it as when I was a child. If I pulled out one piece of the Jenga, the whole tower would come crumbling down.

I pulled my hood up over my head and put my hands into my pockets, trying to hold in as much heat as possible. There was nothing we could do, though. Nothing, other than wait. "I can take a turn watching the road if you want to get some sleep, Jake," I offered. I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway. I might as well be the one to stay up. Let everyone else rest.

"Thanks, Alex," Jake said. For a second, he looked like he might actually get up and let me watch. But instead, he shifted where he sat and faced me. "Actually, though, I've been wanting to talk to you about something." He paused for a second. I shot him a look out of the corner of my eye, suddenly wishing I could crawl back into the ditch and hide.

"Alex, we've been friends since we were kids," Jake continued. "If something's wrong, you can talk to me about it, you know?"

"Nothing's wrong," I responded too quickly.

"You've been hanging out with Cade a lot lately," Jake said. "If the two of you have been into anything, I won't judge you, man. I just need to know what's up."

I ground my teeth. From the start of the tour, Jake hadn't liked Cade. I remembered a night after one of our shows—the one where I'd passed out on stage. It was late, and I was sitting on our bus with the two of them. Everyone else had already gone to sleep.

"Hey, maybe tone it down, Alex," Jake said. He sat on the bench across from Cade and me , passing a can of PBR between his hands. "You probably shouldn't be drinking at all tonight."

A haze hung in my mind, like the world was swirling around me. "I'm fine." I took a sip of my beer, and the disorientation intensified. I felt like I was going to pass out again.

Jake's gaze landed on Cade. A strange tension hung between the two of them ,making the whole space feel frozen. A coldness pulse from the base of my spine up to my brain.

"Don't tell him what to do," Cade said. His dark eyes flickered, and an incongruous grin crept across his face.

I shook myself from the memory, bringing my gaze to meet Jake's.

"What, like drugs?" I asked. I let out an uncalled for laugh. Something about the situation suddenly struck me funny. "You think I'm on drugs?"

"I'm not saying that," Jake said.

"Liz told me that you asked her if she thought I was on drugs." I felt myself grinning. Why did I find this so funny? My hysteria was scaring me. I covered my mouth, trying to calm myself.

Jake was silent for a second. "I'm just concerned about you. You're

tired all the time. Barely eating. You're my best friend, Alex. I don't want something bad to happen to you. When you passed out at that show . . . you were unconscious for a while. It really scared me."

I clenched my hands around the dry grass by my feet, pinching my eyes shut as I thought back to our set that night.

"How are we doing tonight Cleveland?" I yelled into the microphone. My heart pounded with the thrill and excitement of performing.

Liz beat on the drums, and the crowd screamed back in a roar. I grinned. I loved the rush.

"Well, you're all looking fucking fantastic." I panted, catching my breath from the previous song. I swung my head back so my sweaty hair flung out of my face. Looking out, I could hardly see the audience. Lights shined up at the stage. It was like staring into the sun.

"Are you all ready for Wolfpack?" I bellowed.

Another chorus of screams erupted from the audience.

Sweat dripped from my back and forehead. The heat from the lights was intense, especially after running around on stage and screaming my lungs out for forty-five minutes. My head spun.

"Thanks for coming out and rocking with us tonight, Ohio." I turned back and looked to my band. Jake wiped his brow, his guitar slung around his neck. When I caught his eye, he nodded to me. I nodded back and turned around.

My vision darkened around the edges as I stared out into the lights. My body felt faint. I knew I was redlining with exhaustion, but I could push through.

"Alex." Jake's voice pulled me out of the memory.

"It was just exhaustion," I snapped defensively. I took a second to breathe and calm myself. "I haven't been sleeping too well lately." I paused and looked down the road for a few seconds, wishing for headlights to somehow magically emerge in the distance and save me from this conversation. "I haven't been for a while now . . . It's

gotten pretty bad. Some nights, I don't sleep at all." I looked back to Jake, this time making eye contact and holding it. "I'm sorry if I've been worrying you."

Jake nodded knowingly. "All right." He frowned as he said it, though. I could tell he didn't really trust me.

But that was it, wasn't it? That was all there was. It was just exhaustion. Right? I wasn't lying . . . was I?

Was there something I was missing? It felt like there was something on the tip of my tongue—the corona of my memory—something I should be remembering but wasn't.

Cade and I had stayed up that night—after Jake had given up and gone to sleep. He'd asked me something. I got the feeling there was something important about it, but the details lingered out of reach.

Cade leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He turned to look me in the eyes, but my vision fogged over. My entire brain spun.

"You saw something when it happened, didn't you?" he asked. "Right before you passed out."

My heart pounded against my ribs. Everything faded towards darkness. It was like I was falling—the world tipped on its axis.

"What did you see?"

A chill rushed through me, the question pounding through my mind. I couldn't remember how I'd responded. After that, everything went dark.

Why had he asked that? What was he expecting me to respond with?

I forced myself back to that night, back to the stage, or at least what I could recall of it.

"We're Make Them Scream," I shouted, "and this is going to be our last song." I paused for a second while the crowd cheered. "I wanna see how crazy a circle pit Cleveland can make on this one. Right in front of the

stage, right here." I motioned to the center of the floor. "Let's go wild, Ohio. If someone falls, you pick them up! Got it?" Shouting and screaming erupted from the audience. "This last song's called 'Event Horizon,' and it's a song about never giving up."

I took the microphone away from my face for a second, giving myself one last chance to catch my breath. Finally, after letting the overheated air out of my lungs in a gust, I brought the mic back to my mouth. "One, two, three, four!"

Drums crashed and thundered behind me, and the guitars wailed and screeched. The stage shook under my feet. I came into the first verse on a heavy scream. It exploded from my lungs like a roar: "GET UP!"

The stage spun around me. I blinked. The spotlights shone down like the eyes of the devil. Like two balls of fire flying towards me.

Like headlights.

And that was when everything went dark.

The sound of wolves howling pulled me out of the memory. Jake was on high alert, the flashlight on his phone back on. He leapt to his feet, shining the light into the trees along the cuff of the forest.

"That sounded closer," I said, standing up next to him.

Jake nodded as he glanced up and down the road.

"Maybe we should head back to the bus," I suggested. "I don't think any cars are coming by in the middle of the night. We can start watching the road again in the morning . . ."

"Alex," Jake interrupted me. I felt his hand grab me by the arm, and he pointed off to the woods across the road. "Do you see that?"

||5||

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